

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 14, October 2006

Home Visits (II)—Contributing to a Spiritual Culture

In May 2004 the second issue of this newsletter focused on home visits. This activity in the previous Five Year Plan grew out of the practice component of Ruhi Institute Book 2 and then evolved into a key element of both the expansion and consolidation work in advanced clusters. Since our initial treatment of this subject in 2004, a great deal of experience has been gained about conducting home visits. The intimate setting of one's home has been conducive to sharing the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with friends and neighbors as well as deepening themes with recently enrolled believers. Bonds of friendship have been fostered with seekers and revived with longtime Bahá'ís.

The importance of home visits in the current framework for growth reaches to the heart of what it means to build a Bahá'í community and a new civilization. Although raising up a new world order is concerned with governance and other social principles, it is fundamentally about building a global society based on justice and love. Is it sufficient to call people to a center for meetings and expect them to come, or do we need to visit one another and talk about spiritual matters and aspirations? Home visits have proven effective because they lend themselves to promoting a Bahá'í conversation—discussions on spiritual concerns that strengthen bonds of fellowship, love, and unity.

Visiting the friends is a long-established practice in the Faith, but during the previous Plan it took on added dimensions and became a more systematic process. In an account of the services of a believer in *Memorials of the Faithful*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "As he traveled along with his two sons...he paused on every hilltop, in every plain, village and hamlet to visit with the friends." Shoghi Effendi repeatedly referred to "visits" as an element of consolidation and the systematic development of a community:

Through guidance, assistance, encouragement, frequent visits whenever possible, the community of the believers in...should be nursed and prepared to discharge befittingly its sacred responsibilities....

He (the Guardian) urges you to make a special effort to visit the friends in other places where you stop, no matter how short the time, as the news of the progress of the Faith in general will encourage and hearten them.

Although in the early days of the Faith, travelling teachers were most often the believers that carried out a program of visits, Shoghi Effendi, in discussing the challenges of the global Plan, made it clear that "every believer, however humble and inexperienced, should sense the obligation to play his or her part" and called on the friends to support the teaching work "through the frequency of their visits."

The Guardian stressed the point that no sense of superiority should underlie one's attitude when undertaking a visit for the purpose of deepening a fellow believer:

Visiting teachers...their task is to encourage and inspire individual believers, and to broaden and deepen their vision of the task that is to be done. And this, not by virtue of any inherent spiritual right, but in the spirit of simple and whole-hearted cooperation.

The above quotation underlines the importance of cultivating the appropriate attitudes for carrying out this act of service. This aspect is discussed at length in Book 2, which prepares the participants to carry out home visits with “efficiency and love.” Not only is it important to visit seekers and believers to share the Faith’s teachings, but the friends also need to exemplify humility and the joy one feels at having the privilege of sharing God’s Message with others.

The experience of the past five years has been that when Bahá’ís visit the homes of seekers, new believers, or believers not currently involved in community activities, there are often other family members and friends who are present, or join the group, and they become attracted to the Faith. Many of them want to enroll in an institute course themselves. In this way, it has become apparent that home visits have great potential as a means of reaching out and enlarging our community of interest and for the teaching work in general. More and more believers who have completed Books 4 and 6 have found that home visits offer a favorable environment for them to share stories about Bahá’u’lláh or, for example, the material from “Anna’s presentation.” Thus the act of service practiced in connection with Book 2 has laid the foundation for a number of expansion and consolidation activities, both in urban and rural settings, and in clusters at different stages of development.

The accounts of home visits that follow represent a range of contexts. Some visits have been undertaken to deepen new believers, some to attract contacts to the core activities, and others have been part of direct teaching efforts in intensive programs of growth.

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The service of sharing the deepening themes presented in Ruhi Institute Book 2 has been the motivation for many home visits and has proved to be a strong component of the teaching and consolidation work in many countries. Experience has shown that home visits have been effective in settings even where the friends were initially unsure of their ability to carry out this act of service.

United Kingdom

This story demonstrates that when the friends commit themselves to carrying out the practice components associated with the institute courses and are assisted by their tutors, they gain confidence and skills, and remarkable results are achieved.

Like many tutors, when I was a participant in a Book 2 study circle, we did not do home visits. Perhaps none of us realized how important they were, or perhaps we just did not know where to start. Some of us thought that it was not very “English” to invite yourself to someone’s home, and many of us did not know any new Bahá’ís to visit. So when I tutored Book 2 for the first time, I repeated this pattern with my participants. I did tell them that home visits were an essential part of the course, but I left it up to them to find and arrange the visits. Not surprisingly, out of ten participants, not one person carried out the practice.

Through the gradual shared learning across England, and the loving and patient guidance offered in tutor encounters and tutor conferences, I gained more confidence with home visits. When I next came to tutor Book 2, I spent some time with the participants discussing how home visits would work. Together we realized that it is perfectly acceptable in England to

visit the home of another person, but it is usual to wait for an invitation from that person first. So, overcoming their fears of breaking the cultural mold, they visited a new believer and shared one of the deepening themes. The new believer had recently been elected to a Local Spiritual Assembly, and asked if they could come back the following week and help her deepen on that topic! These same participants, on reaching Book 4, were far less hesitant to try the practice element, and went to the home of a newly enrolled couple to share the story of the life of the Báb. The couple were very enthusiastic about the presentation and were eager for their visitors to come back and share the story of Bahá'u'lláh.

As a tutor, my role in all this was to give the participants time and space to discuss their plans and fears, and then to ensure that they had identified people to visit and arranged a date for the visit.

The most useful experience I have had with home visits, however, was in doing them myself. When I have done this act of service, it has always been wonderful and very confirming. One particular example stands out. During the recent intensive teaching campaign in Greater London, I was able to take the time and reach out to a friend of mine who had always been reasonably interested in the Faith. Over the years I had invited this friend to many events, and she had shown interest, but never moved closer to the Faith. Since the focus of our activity was on home visits, I went to her house and spent the entire day with her. I had taken a prayer book with me, and I suggested that we say a prayer for her new baby. She was so delighted, and we read several prayers together. Then she told me that she was very interested in the Faith and we had a long discussion.

The following week I went again to her home. We discussed her remaining questions (with me trying to answer as “Anna” would) and then the next week she enrolled as a Bahá'í! She and her husband are now in a Book 1 study circle.

Hungary

The following story describes how friends from a study circle worked in teams to carry out a home visit. It also offers an inspiring example of a new believer who was deepened through home visits, went on to join institute courses, and became effective in presenting deepening themes when she made home visits herself.

I have had the joy to tutor a Book 2 study circle. Although I love this book, to be honest I realized that we hadn't actually deepened an individual using all the deepening themes. As a result of our consultation, one of our study circle participants contacted a recently declared Bahá'í who attends a Book 1 study circle with her husband, who is not yet a Bahá'í. To encourage each other, we decided to give the talks in pairs.

The husband of one of our participants, a recently declared Bahá'í who usually travels for work, happened to be home. He asked if he could bring his mother, who is Catholic but feels very close to the Bahá'ís. There were six of us at the home visit, including two seekers. We had arranged that we would give the presentations from the first two deepening themes in Book 2. I would talk about the “Eternal Covenant of God” and another friend would cover the “Life of Bahá'u'lláh.” Supporting us was my wife (also a member of the study circle) who offered to look after our two-year-old son and someone else's child, allowing the rest of us to be free to do our home visit.

The atmosphere was warm and friendly, and the couple we visited expressed great joy that we came to their home. After some green tea and biscuits, we said prayers and sang a few songs. This really elevated the atmosphere. Then after a few words about our study circle and the things we are learning together, I began with the first theme. I didn't want to just read the text but rather speak from the heart. But I did want to stick closely to the ideas and thoughts expressed beautifully in the deepening theme. When contemplating the introduction in the text, which mentions that God is the Creator of all things, I thought of the prayer "Blessed is the Spot..." because it mentions so many things that God has created, the most important being the human heart. So we sang this prayer, too. The mother, who was a seeker, was very moved by the prayers and the beauty and simplicity of the ideas and analogies contained in the deepening theme. During the presentation, she had a lot to share from her life experiences, such as the passing of her husband. At that moment, we reflected on the significance of the suffering of the Manifestations of God, and we all felt the potency of Bahá'u'lláh's Words.

After the first talk, our dear friend, who is a new believer herself, gave her presentation on the "Life of Bahá'u'lláh." Beforehand she had expressed nervousness as this was the first time she had to do it, although she was well prepared and had brought with her quotes from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and a description in His own words of the time in the Síyáh-Chál. The moment she began to speak all the nervousness went away. It was truly magnificent. She spoke from her heart and, yet, was coherent and crystal clear. Listening to her was like watching a film as she took us vividly through the awe-inspiring events of the life of the Manifestation of God for our day and age. Here was somebody who has been so moved by the majesty of Bahá'u'lláh's life that she lifted the words from the pages, internalized them, made them her own, and then shared with us this most significant of themes in a sincere, engaging, and natural way. As far as I know, she is one of the first friends in Hungary who had received home visits after becoming a Bahá'í, including some deepening themes from Book 2. She has now proceeded to do Book 2 herself and holds presentations in other people's homes using the very same materials.

We are planning the next visit to this same couple's home and other friends' homes too. Having had this experience, our energy level is really high. No matter what one's life experiences are, ultimately the human heart is hungry and strives for truth, beauty, and knowledge. A home visit is an arena in which the heart can recognize and receive truth when shared with kindness, radiance, and purity of intention. Our efforts are far from perfect, and we need to do these things again and again, but as we "do" and not just talk about doing, confirmations come from on high, our eyes are opened to new realities, and we grow in confidence, understanding, and effectiveness.

Nordic Cities

A series of home visit campaigns in a few European countries was conducted, eliciting the following reflections from those involved:

- "I was nervous but it proved not to be difficult and will be easy from now on."
- "Knowing the exact purpose of making the visit made it easy."
- "I had been thinking of making a home visit—now I have done it and am determined to continue."
- "Sensitivity and flexibility are important in relation to the needs of those visited."

- “What had appeared to be shocking and impossible in our country proved to be quite possible.”
- “People are yearning for such visits and ready to discuss prayers.”
- “It is important that the purpose is so clearly defined, underlining that this is not a social visit.”

In accordance with the advice from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies, home visits have proved effective in renewing friendships with Bahá'ís who have not been seen for some time and in rekindling their faith.

Kenya

The national institute coordinator reported that in the Ndivisi Webuye cluster, home visits were conducted to share the deepening themes on the “Eternal Covenant” and the “Nineteen Day Feast” with less active believers. Three local communities that had lapsed were revived, one children’s class and two junior youth groups formed, and 20 members of the community of interest taught. Ten of them were recruited to join study circles and are now studying Book 3. Others were invited to firesides for further teaching. Ten of the Bahá’ís are now fully participating in core activities after receiving home visits.

The report also describes the impact of home visits in the Bumula cluster where three Local Spiritual Assemblies were elected last year. After the home visits, five Local Assemblies were elected this year. The coordinator adds, “an institute campaign [was] established and now the believers [are] fully climbing the sequence.” Five children’s classes were also formed as a result of the home visits, and three seekers have joined an institute course. The institute coordinator concluded:

Home visits are serving as a way of binding the Bahá’ís together and a source of reaching out to the outside world....This home visit to me is a way of bringing life to dormant believers and also an avenue for teaching the waiting masses.

Marshall Islands

There is a renewed spirit moving in the Majuro cluster. For some time the progress of the core activities had been moderately slow and the pattern of study circles somewhat erratic. Events began to change, however, with the introduction of the concept of home visits. At a cluster meeting, the consultations resulted in a plan for home visits that first focused on visiting Bahá’ís that had not been active for some time. Their response to the home visits was one of open enthusiasm. In several instances, non-Bahá’í members of the extended family joined in the discussions and became involved, thus expanding the community of interest. Some of the communities followed up on this success by starting study circles, others began with children’s classes, and still others carried out both of these activities as well as devotional meetings. It was not unusual to find five or six study circles in process on any one evening.

In the Rairok community, the success of home visits produced several significant outcomes. It brought into the institute process a relatively large number of people, including adults, youth, and children, almost doubling the number of active believers in the community. There emerged from the new group a choir that wrote and performed its own music and songs based on the Holy Writings in

the Ruhi Institute books. A further outcome of the home visits was that receptivity was discovered among the minority group of I-Kiribati people living in the Marshalls. Another heartwarming result was that five of the believers who have not been active became rekindled and have been regular participants at Feasts, Holy Days, and devotional gatherings.

Home visits have provided a comfortable setting for believers to extend invitations to friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers to participate in core activities.

Azerbaijan

Midway in the third cycle of their intensive program of growth, the friends in the Baku cluster started with a home visit campaign with the aim of visiting 80 homes. The initial report after only six days of activity indicated that 18 teams had visited 28 homes, resulting in three new study circles.

Romania

The two-week expansion phase of the first cycle of the intensive program of growth in Bucharest was focused principally on home visits. Over 91 home visits were conducted by 13 teaching teams, leading to an immediate increase in the community of interest by 31 individuals, the initiation of 6 new study circles, and to another 25 seekers joining core activities later in the cycle, bringing the number in the community of interest to 56.

Most of the reports now being received about home visits describe those carried out in connection with teaching projects. The believers are demonstrating the confidence and skills gained from completing their study of Books 2 and 6.

Colombia

One report came from a predominantly rural area that has demonstrated a special receptivity to the Faith for many years and has 49 Local Spiritual Assemblies. At the end of three weeks of intensive teaching in the Norte del Cauca cluster, it was reported that 94 teachers had visited 530 people and 292 new believers embraced the Cause. These achievements were the results of efforts in five communities. One community had surpassed its goals in the first two and a half days of the teaching phase.

United Kingdom

A report on the intensive program of growth in London shared this firsthand account from a believer:

We asked our friend, who was already close to the Faith, whether we could do a home visit with her on Saturday morning. Since she does not feel so comfortable with her flatmates, we asked whether she could come to our home. We planned to go through “Anna’s presentation” with her and prepared for it the night before. We were also aware that she would have questions that she would like to ask. When she came, it somehow happened that we started talking about the Faith right away and, even though we did not follow the exact same

sequence as in Book 6, we were able to mention the full content of “Anna’s presentation” and a lot more. It was all very natural and intermingled with her comments and questions. It was amazing for us to see how easily one can cover all of “Anna’s presentation” in a few hours. Our friend was very happy with our discussion. She is eager to do Book 1 with us and has agreed to ask some of her friends whether they would be interested as well!

Tanzania

A Bahá’í family of Hindu background, who became Bahá’ís fairly recently, were studying Book 2 and wanted to carry out an act of service in support of the intensive program of growth in their cluster. They sat down and made a list of friends that they could go and visit to share some themes about the Faith. The names were of individuals they had invited to devotional meetings and who had shown some interest. Before undertaking the visits, the family came together and prayed for divine assistance. Out of the three families they visited, one family—the husband, wife, and son—were very attracted to the beauty of the teachings and had many questions. They discussed the themes of “The Covenant of God” and “God and His Manifestations.” Since the family they were visiting was also of Indian background, they took with them pictures of the Lotus Temple in India. On the next visit, the Bahá’ís invited some other believers to join them in the home visit. The entire family, including the 14-year-old son, became Bahá’ís. The parents have joined a Book 1 course and the son is in a youth class. Now that the consolidation phase of the intensive program of growth has begun, the family studying Book 2 is making another home visit to this newly enrolled family and sharing additional spiritual themes with them.

The following accounts about two intensive programs of growth are examples of when home visits were used as part of the consolidation phase after a teaching campaign. In this approach the friends shared the deepening themes presented in Book 2 with new believers, who often were then inspired to join an institute course.

India

In the Tamil Nadu state of India, friends who had completed Book 2 were systematically deployed to carry out home visits and excellent results were achieved:

During the recent cycle of growth in the Sivakasi and Thiruvannamalai clusters, it was found that there still remained a good number of new believers who had to be enrolled for the institute courses and we felt the need to systematize the home visit campaigns. The following measures were therefore undertaken: (1) Compiling village-wise lists of the new believers who were yet to be enrolled for the institute courses; (2) Compiling a list of the graduates of Ruhi Institute Book 2 in the areas where the new believers were enrolled; and (3) Organizing a program to study the seven deepening themes once again with these graduates, followed by detailed planning on who would visit which new believers, the dates for the visit, and the sharing of each deepening theme. In Ramalingapuram (Sivakasi), one believer who was conducting a study circle on Book 2 in a nearby village, took the participants along with him to visit four new believers and they shared with them the deepening theme on the Covenant and part of the second theme on the Life of Bahá’u’lláh. This resulted in all the four believers joining the institute course on Book 1. Similarly two other friends took three graduates of Book 2 to visit eight believers and shared with them the first deepening theme. All eight believers have expressed eagerness to study Book 1 and these friends will soon establish a

study circle for them. In another part of Sivakasi, Alamarathupatti, three friends have shared the first deepening theme on the Covenant with 12 new believers, who became very happy and interested. While seven of them have been enrolled for the study of Book 1, five others have started attending devotional meetings.

A similar program for home visits was organized in the Thiruvannamalai cluster during the recent consolidation phase of its intensive program of growth. Following a refresher course on the first three deepening themes of Book 2, eight graduates of Book 2 devised a plan to visit the 60 new believers in Pandithapattu village, each of them planning to visit four to nine new believers with whom they would share the first three deepening themes during three visits. So far they have met 40 new believers and have shared with them the deepening themes. Twenty-five of these new believers are now ready to study Book 1 and their names have been given to the institute coordinator. Similarly, in Nallavanpalayam village, five graduates of Book 2 met 25 believers and have so far shared with them three deepening themes. Fifteen of these new believers are now ready to study Book 1.

Mongolia

At the end of the intensive teaching phase of the first cycle of the intensive program of growth in the Murun cluster, the Faith had been taught to 780 people. Of these, 140 adults enrolled, and 60 youth and junior youth expressed a desire to be part of the community. An effort was made to immediately begin to deepen these 200 new believers and integrate them into core activities.

During the following weeks of the consolidation phase, particular attention was given to carrying out home visits. During a 21-day period, 19 teams visited 59 homes and shared deepening themes with 247 people. This proved to be an effective way of gradually leading the new friends into the institute process.

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